

YOU PAY \$88 A YEAR FOR “FREE” PLASTIC BAGS¹

Leah Zerbe[©]

Do we need a plastic bag ban? As Bob Dylan has said, “The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind...”

Not even the sun-loving, environmentally conscious, forward-thinking state of California could overcome the plastics industry lobby and ban plastic bags in the Golden State, even though the “urban tumbleweeds” cost billions of bucks to clean up. Tuesday, the California legislation shot down what would have been the first statewide ban of single-use plastic bags in the U.S. by a vote of 20 to 14.

Don’t live in California? Doesn't matter. Our plastic bag addiction is likely leaving traces in your bloodstream. “The plastic bags do break into smaller bits in the ocean, and have been found in fish stomachs; larger marine animals eat whole bags because they think they are jellyfish,” says environmental attorney, Lisa Kaas Boyle, cofounder of the Plastic Pollution Coalition. The most likely human health implication of the bags, she says, is from eating fish that have ingested the plastic confetti that the bags become as they degrade. “The ocean is becoming a sea of plastic fragments, and we are at the top of the food chain that feeds off that sea of plastic,” she notes.

Sound like an extreme claim? Heck, even the President's Cancer Panel suggests plastic is causing health problems.

THE DETAILS: Boyle says the major force opposing the bill was the American Chemistry Council, a trade association that represents, among other chemical companies, the manufacturers of petrochemicals and products made from petroleum, such as plastic bags. “America, as a whole is behind the curve on this issue, as more than 40 jurisdictions worldwide have already banned the single-use plastic bag, including China and Mexico City,” says Boyle. “The jurisdictions that have banned the single-use plastic bag amount to 25 percent of the world population.”

The typical grocery bag is made from polyethylene, a byproduct of petroleum and natural gas. Extracting these fossil fuels threatens our national water supply and, as we've seen in the Gulf oil disaster, our food supply and the livelihood of millions of people. According to the Plastic Pollution Coalition, the energy used to make about nine plastic bags is equivalent to the energy it takes to drive a car more than half a mile. The group also points out that it costs about three to five cents to create a plastic bag, which retailers absorb by raising prices. And how's this for impractical? Researchers have found that when you add up cleanup costs, it comes out to about 17 cents a bag, meaning the average taxpayers pays about \$88 extra a year to clean up plastic pollution.

California resident Beth Terry, author of the popular blog, Fake Plastic Fish, which chronicles her low-plastic lifestyle, says some of the claims made in urging against the plastic bag ban were downright bogus. “For example, the claim that the bag ban would have reduced manufacturing jobs is an outright lie,” she says. “I spoke with a California manufacturer of heavy-gauge plastic

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bags [not those affected by the ban], who said that there are virtually no plastic T-shirt bags [the kind targeted by the bill] produced in California," she explains.

"Another lie is that buying reusable bags is a hardship for low-income people," Terry adds. "First of all, the bill provided for free reusable bags for low-income people. And second, the cost of 'free' plastic bags is simply passed on to the consumer in the first place."

WHAT IT MEANS: So what gives? Why can't we move beyond those crappy single-use plastic bags they give out at the grocery store? Boyle thinks it's because Americans pay for cleanup of plastic bag pollution through their taxes. (For instance, in California, the state spends billions to clean up beaches, unclog storm drains, and de-litter parks and roadways. On top of that, it costs serious money to haul all of these bags to the landfill.) "So in America taxpayers pay an enormous amount to deal with the bags after they are used just once by shoppers," explains Boyle. "In other nations where waste management is not covered by taxpayers, the bags are literally taking over, and the people can see the results of the single-use mentality all around them."

In other words, the evidence hits them in the face as they're walking down a street, or occupies the trees and shrubs in their neighborhood. Google "plastic sea turtle photos" and you'll find more gut-wrenching reasons to kick the plastic habit. "Forty percent of sea turtles have ingested plastic because the bags look just like jellyfish to them," says Boyle. In fact, Terry started her blog and quest to eliminate plastic from her life after seeing a photo of an albatross whose stomach exploded after eating too much plastic.

And another dirty little secret: "These bags are almost impossible to recycle," Boyle says. "We legislated a recycling requirement in California and still haven't achieved more than a 5 percent recycling rate. This is because the recyclers hate the bags — they jam the machines, they produce little material for the effort, and virgin material is more cost-effective."

Here's how you can help subdue the plastic pollution problem:

- **Say no to paper and plastic.** Ever refused a plastic bag at a store and it seemed like it almost pained the cashier? That's because throwaway bags are so ubiquitous in society, even though the thought of them most likely would make our penny-pinching, practical ancestors sick. Just invest in a few good washable, canvas bags and keep them in your car, and vow to say "neither" when cashiers ask, "Paper or plastic?"

Have trouble remembering to take bags to the store? Carry your purchases out by hand just once or twice, and you'll probably never forget your reusable bags again!

- **Enact a local ban.** California is a big state, so trying to tackle a plastic bag ban might be easier on a local level, and can still have a big impact. "Many local jurisdictions around the world have already enacted bans, and they are working well," says Boyle. "Some have fees, like Ireland where a fee has almost eliminated the use of plastic bags."
- **Facebook ID the worst offenders.** Check out Terry's Plastic Crap Wall of Shame on Facebook, where viewers can send in the worst examples of ridiculous plastic packaging. (Even individually plastic-wrapped organic potatoes are on the list.) You can document and send in your own sightings. Be sure to post a photo and include company contact info, so those supporting a reduction in plastic pollution can contact the offenders.